

The Catherine de Medicis of Fact

A Review by **FREDERIC TABER COOPER.**

THE CATHERINE DE MEDICIS OF FACT. By Paul Van Dyke. Two volumes. Charles Scribner's Sons.

THE popular conception of Catherine de Medicis, wife of one French King, mother of three others, and for half a lifetime the power behind the throne, was as a symbol of victorious evil, a legendary and fantastic incarnation of remorseless treachery. In his eight hundred pages of diligent research, drawn directly from original records and Government archives, Prof. Van Dyke has substituted for the legend a logical and consistent flesh and blood personality, and while not attempting to deny the "visible aura of wickedness" surrounding her, he makes her understandable both in her vaulting ambitions and in the monstrous methods she sometimes used to gain them.

Especially praiseworthy is the author's assumption that these volumes will be read by many persons not intimately familiar with the historical details of the period covered; accordingly, even at the risk of over elaboration, he has continuously digressed to give a minute survey of the social and political aspects of the times, and has set forth the complicated family relationships between kings and princes, popes and cardinals, lawful wives and acknowledged mistresses, so picturequely and entertainingly that one would feel well repaid for reading it, even without the central interest of the star part played by Catherine herself.

Her own character is given us in a series of vivid, luminous portraits, from the time of her marriage at the age of 14 to the young Duke of Orleans (later Henry II.), when as shown in her extant letters she was "a badly educated young girl, who had

little to say and did not know well how to say it." But even then she had to the full "that exaggerated, morbid pride, which was characteristic of all the men and women of the Italian Renaissance"; and she must have found it hard to bear her young husband's open infatuation for Diana of Poitiers and "the badly concealed contempt of the great lords and ladies of the French Court, who looked down upon her as a merchant's daughter married for her money." Yet within four months of her marriage, we find her writing to her uncle, Clement VII., a scheming letter that shows not only how quickly she caught the spirit of court intrigue, but that already she felt that zest for political power which later became her dominant passion.

Throughout the earlier years, successively as the young Duchess of Orleans, as wife of the heir to the throne and as Henry II.'s Queen and mother of his ten children, Catherine played her self-assigned part of "dutiful submissiveness." Even during the reign of her oldest son, Francis II., she made no attempt to assume control of the Government—although she much resented the fact that he had not looked to her as chief adviser, and assumed a lasting dislike for Mary, Queen of Scots, to whom he had preferred to listen. But when Charles IX., at the age of 10, came to the throne, Catherine seized the reins of power and "prevented the possibility of anybody stepping in between them by sleeping in his room." Henceforth we see her always consistently playing a great game of politics (never rising to the dignity of statesmanship) for the greater glory and greater wealth of herself and her family. "She cared little for theories of government, constitutional or otherwise. The assertion of a constitutional or demo-

cratic theory of government seemed to her like the appearance of a mental disease—an outbreak of contagious fever." And while she was not unaware of the existence of foreign policies, their main importance to her was in furthering propitious marriages for her sons and daughters.

The great blot upon the whole period of Catherine's sway is, of course, the Massacre of St. Bartholomew. And here Prof. Van Dyke naturally lingers longest. Of all the contradictory stories told by Catholic and Huguenot, by the royal house, by Catherine herself, he deplores the fact that credence has been gained chiefly for the tradition that the massacre was the outcome of a long standing, carefully laid plot. History, he insists, has now returned to "the better opinion of some contemporary Protestant writers, that the massacre was not premeditated, but a sudden decision of Catherine's at the eleventh hour, the better to conceal her own plot to do away with Admiral Coligny."

As for any atom of fanaticism or religious zeal entering into that historic orgy of bloodshed, so far as Catherine was concerned, is amply disproved by a single quotation from her letter to Elizabeth, which Prof. Van Dyke characterizes as "the only sincere phrase in the whole complicated web she wove around the deed . . . where she suggests that the Queen of England ought not to mind her execution of the Huguenots who endangered the State any more than she would mind if the Queen of England did execution against those who troubled her, 'even if they should be all the Catholics in England.'"

Such, as Prof. Van Dyke paints her portrait, is the true Catherine de Medicis, a woman who would go to any length to gain her personal, selfish ends; who would give the signal to slay unnumbered thousands of men, women and children, if they threatened to trouble her nicely laid plans. The book leaves her a less romantic, less spec-

tacular figure than one gets, let us say, from the imaginative pages of Dumas; but the carefully documented personality now before us is at least a more convincing creation than ever was the popular legend.



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BISMARCK'S DIPLOMACY AT ITS ZENITH. By Joseph Vincent Fuller. Harvard University Press.

THE baffling labyrinth of European diplomacy which, from the Franco-Prussian war until the break with William II. in 1890, practically revolved about the "iron" personality of the German Chancellor, Prince von Bismarck, presents one of the most fecund fields for speculation ever presented to historians. The period is shrouded in a haze of intrigue and secret manipulation of diplomatic affairs through which the personality of the "Iron Chancellor" appears as the director of a constantly shifting situation, having as its end the advancement of Germany's supremacy in European affairs.

The period, which Dr. Fuller has chosen to illuminate, beginning with the interview between the Austrian and Russian Emperors at Kremsier in August, 1885, and ending with Bismarck's speech in the Reichstag on February 6, 1888, is one of the most crowded with events in the Chancellor's entire career. The Eastern question, marked by the mutual jealousy of England and Russia over the supremacy in Afghanistan, was brought dangerously near a clash between armed forces, Russo-Austrian affairs were continually kept in a state of violent unrest, occasioned primarily by the Bulgarian revolution and the general tendency toward revolution in the Balkan States, while the ill-concealed hatred of France for Germany was twice swept into the open, notably over the alleged duplicity of Bismarck in attempting placing Prince Ferdinand of Coburg upon the Bulgarian throne.

The hand of Bismarck was constantly seen in European intrigue. Untiring in his attempts to sustain and further the German position, his efforts forced him continually to secret treaties and intrigues tending toward a secure intrenchment of the Imperial Government against the possibility of an eventual war. Bismarck saw that the conflict was inevitable, but it was his thought that it might be averted until 1892, the year when, in his opinion, the several European Powers would have achieved their maximum war strength. With this thought ever before him he sought to assure his country, by treaty and understanding, of the assistance of the other Powers which he felt necessary to his interests in the case of a dreaded

attack on two fronts through the concerted action of Russia and France.

Dr. Fuller has accomplished his work in a way which leaves little to be desired. The difficulties of his task must necessarily have been legion, notably because Bismarck's own accounts of his foreign policy and the meager and often highly colored parliamentary reports of the various Powers fail to offer the key to a situation whose understanding lies solely in an examination of the correlated data, available for the most part only during the last few years.

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